

3-1-1983

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### Recommended Citation

Alper, Clifford D. (1983) "Thematic Similarities in Early and Middle Verdi," *Verdi Forum*: No. 11, Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss11/2>

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# Thematic Similarities in Early and Middle Verdi

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi, opera

# Thematic Similarities in Early and Middle Verdi

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Writers on Verdi, among them Francis Toye, Julian Budden, and Frits Noske, have suggested that musical foreshadowings and reminiscences play an important role in his compositions, and they have explained them in various ways. One aspect, however, seems to have escaped their attention: that a melody may appear in one or more of Verdi's operas in incipient form and then be taken up in a later work as if he were continuing to develop an incomplete idea. When he finally achieves the most expansive and successful version of the theme, as in two examples to be discussed below, he is usually finished with the idea, and it does not appear in later works. This view of melodic development in Verdi does not apply to primarily rhythmic, accompanimental patterns, such as those Noske calls Musical Figures of Death. Verdi's use of these rhythmic devices in several operas, however, does tend to corroborate a belief that repetition constitutes an important factor in contributing to his style of composition. In the case of the Death Figure, little development of the pattern occurs; Verdi simply selects one of its several manifestations and repeats this an ap-

propriate number of times. On the other hand, in terms of melody as well as of rhythm, patterns which recur in more than one opera tend to take on greater meaning, more subtlety as Verdi develops his compositional abilities. In many situations when Verdi utilizes a melody in more than one opera, the later manifestation is more interesting, both musically and dramatically, and there is a tendency toward greater expansiveness as well. A seed is planted in one opera, germinates, and reaches full flower in another, sometimes with other operas intervening.

A striking example occurs in *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849) and *Rigoletto* (1851), and at a parallel structural point, namely the closing choral passage in the first scene of each, the Introduction. In both sections, soli sing with the dominating chorus, the writing is *sotto voce* and legato, and there is a dynamic climax near the end, after which Verdi provides an instrumental close. The time signatures are 3/4 and the melodies move in generally stepwise patterns. Melodic sequences are important for both, as are flat minor keys. Only male voices are heard, and the orchestra doubles the vocal part.

## *La battaglia di Legnano*, Act I, Scene I.

Allegro vivo

legato sempre

Do - man - dan ven - det - ta - gli al - ta - ri spo -

glia - ti, le don - ne, i fan - ciul - li dal - l'em - pio sve -

## Rigoletto, Act I, Scene I.

Vivace

sotto voce assai



Oh tu che la fe - sta au - da - ce hai tur - ba - to, da un ge - nio d'in -  
fer - no qui fo - sti gui - da - to;

An important difference between the two is to be found in the treatment of individual characters. In *Battaglia*, everyone on stage remains of one mind and therefore all sing together without rhythmic or melodic differentiation. In the later opera, however, Rigoletto's horror and Monterone's curse are rhythmically and melodically differentiated from the main idea of the passage. This tends to suggest that Verdi's *Rigoletto* is primarily an opera of individuals—thus the differentiation in treatment of characters—whereas *Battaglia* remains a call to patriotic ideals, with everyone on stage singing the same words and melody: the collective (*Battaglia*) as compared to the individual (*Rigoletto*). The titles themselves, one an event and the other a person's name, further underline this difference in concept. In effect the two scenes illustrate in microcosm what their respective operas present in macrocosm.

In the scene from *Battaglia*, there is a collective resolve to undo the damage

and humiliation suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors: "vengeance for the women and children slain by the wicked foe." For *Rigoletto* Verdi devised similiar music although the dramatic situation resembles that of *Battaglia* only in that it is extremely serious, even sombre. It may be observed that the music of *Rigoletto* has more impact than the corresponding music in *Battaglia*, which consists basically of a single rising sequential pattern presented four times. The *Rigoletto* theme is inherently longer and more complex. When its rising sequences appear, marked *crescendo poco a poco* as in the *Battaglia* example, there is a *stringendo* effect because Verdi eliminates one measure in each of the final four sequences. The result is greater dramatic and musical tension.

Verdi used this thought again in Act III for the music of Sparafucile and Maddalena as they agree to murder an alternative victim to the Duke of Mantua.

## Rigoletto, Act III.

Allegro



Se pria ch'ab - bia il mez - zo la not - te toc -  
ca - to al - cu - no qui giun - ga, per es - so mor - rà.



Both this theme and that which it resembles in Act I begin by rising—an octave in the Act I chorus, a fourth in Act III—and, for the next eight tones, their intervallic relationships of whole or half steps and repeated pitches remain identical. Although the note values differ, in terms of long and short rhythms both examples are strikingly similar.

Why did Verdi write music for this scene similar to that which brought Act I to a close? A number of explanations come to mind. As he did for all his mature operas, the composer conceived a particular *tinta* for *Rigoletto* and using similar melodic ideas is one way to achieve this *tinta*. Perhaps Verdi's classical sense of form and balance is also operating. He introduces in the last act a variation of music heard in the first, thus balancing the work as a whole. However, since Verdi's creative imagination was fired primarily by dramatic considerations—witness his letters—a desire to achieve classical balance for its own sake probably had low priority in his conscious planning. The most convincing explanation is that Verdi perceived a dramatic relationship between the two scenes. It will be recalled that in Act I all merry-making ceased abruptly with Monte-

rone's entrance. After Monterone's curse, the fate of superstitious Rigoletto was determined, or so the hunchback feared. Since the dialogue between Sparafucile and Maddalena ultimately results in the stabbing of Gilda and this act represents the culmination of the curse, it is conceivable that Verdi is calling the listener's attention musically to these dramatic relationships and to the inevitability of the tragedy. Similar music, then, ties together related dramatic events.

Comparable processes of thematic development, resulting in final, more decisive and more expansive versions, occur elsewhere in Verdi. Melodies similar to "Amami, Alfredo," for example—an idea that Verdi may have originally heard in Donizetti\*—appear in *Attila* (1846), *Il corsaro* (1848), and *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849), are then refined further at two points in *Rigoletto* (1851), and reach their apotheosis in *La traviata* (1853). Thereafter, Verdi no longer uses these themes; his definitive statement has been made.

\*As noted by several authors; cf. Andrew Porter's article on Verdi in the Sixth edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, vol. 19, p. 647.

### Donizetti's *Pia de' Tolomei*.

Moderato assai

con grande espressione



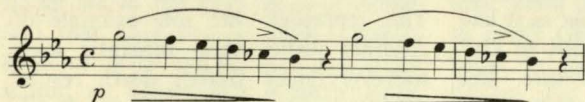
### *Attila*, Act I.

Andante



*Il corsaro*, Act I, Scene II.

Andante



*La battaglia di Legnano*, Act III.

Andante



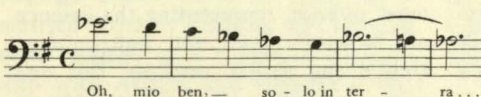
*Rigoletto*, Act I, Scene II.

Allegro assai moderato



*Rigoletto*, Act III.

Allegro



*La traviata*, Act II, Scene I.

Allegro assai mosso

con passione e forza



In *Attila*, the theme is heard first in the orchestral introduction to Odabella's Scene and Aria (Act I). She muses on her love for Foresto, whom she believes dead, and sings the theme during the arioso section of her recitative to the words "Io sola scorro di loco in loco." This is one of two examples in a minor key. Verdi takes eleven measures to present the theme in the orchestral introduction but only six measures in Odabella's recitative. Depicted earlier in the opera as essentially warlike, Odabella here becomes a love-stricken heroine. As a result,

she receives a version of one of Verdi's most effective love themes. It may be observed that the theme as heard here remains Verdi's most extensive presentation of this idea until the culminating statement in *Traviata*.

In *Corsaro* the melody also introduces a lovesick maiden who yearns for her lover. Unlike Odabella, Medora knows Corrado is alive but she has terrible forebodings. Here too the theme is heard twice, but both times orchestrally: during the introduction to the scene, and then briefly restated in the course of her recitative. Before



exception of *Rigoletto*, Act I, Scene II, all are in flat keys. In spite of the fact that only two of these variants, those of *Attila* and *Corsaro*, are in the minor, all depict high levels of emotional intensity. Only in *Rigoletto*, Act III, does a male voice sing; all other scenes are for women. In most manifestations there is immediate repetition of an initial figure, either literal or free, but melodically and rhythmically recognizable. As a result there is usually an added degree of intensity generated internally. There may be dramatic significance in the only expression of the theme in a sharp key. Recall that Gilda is the one woman of those discussed to believe that her romance will end happily. Odabella believes her lover is dead; Medora has grave forebodings about Corrado; Lida, as a married woman, resolves that she can never engage in a romantic relationship with Arrigo; and Violetta is ter-

minating her liaison with Alfredo. Perhaps Verdi uses the brighter sharp key to imply Gilda's positive, albeit naive belief in her burgeoning romance. . Except for this one example and regardless of key, however, this theme characterizes a troubled love, one which will end tragically.

The significance of thematic similarities, of which there are hundreds in Verdi's *oeuvre*, lies in the connections and insights they can establish for his audience. It may be argued that Verdi's extensive self-borrowings and anticipations help to support a concept of his operas as being all of a piece. They indicate that subtle relationships exist between one work and another. Despite immense changes which took place between his first operas and his last, certain characteristics remain constant in Verdi. Not the least of these is a kinship of melodic conception.